Egyptian Myth in *The Waves**

Makiko Sato

Evelyn Haller was the first to discuss Woolf's indebtedness to Egyptian myth in her article entitled "Isis Unveiled: Virginia Woolf's use of Egyptian myth" (1983). Haller argued that Woolf used "the oldest, most enduring, and most coherent female myth: that of Isis" to "make aesthetic war on imperialism, Christianity and patriarchy" (113), in *Between the Acts*. Haller emphasizes Isis and ignores Osiris because of her feminist point of view and she only deals with *Between the Acts*. This is the first attempt to discuss *The Waves* making use of the framework of Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis.

The aim of this paper is to challenge Woolf's finest and most difficult work drawing on Egyptian myth, and bring about an original understanding of *The Waves*, especially Louis and Rhoda. Louis bears an outstanding resemblance to T. S. Eliot, a poet and critic. Eliot's writing was also echoed in Woolf's portrait of Louis. We will apply the myth of Osiris to Louis, referring to the characteristics of Eliot and his works. Rhoda has been seen as Woolf's private voice, and we will apply the myth of Isis to Rhoda, referring to Woolf's autobiographical writings. In conclusion, we will compare Louis and Rhoda in the context of the myth of Osiris and Isis.

I. T. S. Eliot and Louis

Many scholars have seen T. S. Eliot as a model for Louis in *The Waves*, mainly because Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri, led a dual life as a bank clerk and a poet, and felt himself to be an outsider to English society like Louis (Flint n58, 236). Referring to Woolf's diary, we find evidence that Louis is inspired by Eliot. Firstly, Woolf describes Louis using the same adjectives she uses in her diary to describe Eliot, such as, "pale" and "marmoreal". On 5th December in 1920, Woolf wrote that Eliot had a

"grim marble face" and exclaimed "what a big white face he has . . . !" (77). In the next year, on 16th February, she called him "pale, marmoreal Eliot" (90).

In *The Waves*, Woolf emphasizes Louis's eyes and lips: his eyes are "wild" and his lips are "tight pressed" (37). "His thin lips are somewhat pursed; his cheeks are pale." His eyes are described as "laughing eye[s]" and "wild eye[s]" (58). He is "wild-eyed but severe" and "has formed unalterable conclusions upon the true nature of what is to be known" (141). Louis says of himself "my pursed lips, my sallow cheeks and my invariable frown" (142). Finally Bernard summarizes Louis: "He sat staring at the preacher. His being seemed conglobulated in his brow, his lips were pressed; his eyes were fixed, but suddenly they flashed with laughter" (159).

Woolf recorded Eliot, impressed by his luminous eyes: "his eyes are lively and youthful when the cast of his face and the shape of his sentences are formal and even heavy. Rather like a sculpted face — no upper lip: formidable, powerful, pale. Then those hazel eyes, seeming to escape the rest of him" (Leonard Woolf 108). Furthermore, she wrote of him in her diary: "A mouth twisted & shut; not a single line free & easy; all caught, pressed, inhibited; but great driving power some where — & my word what concentration of the eye when he argues!" (*D. ii.* 77) Woolf uses the same adjectives which she uses for eyes of Louis, "Tom's wild eyes" (*D. iii.* 242).

Moreover, Louis and Eliot share the characteristic of not getting along well with others. Bernard sums up Louis:

> He suffered from chilblains, the penalty of an imperfect circulation. Unhappy, unfriended, in exile he would sometimes, in moments of confidence, describe how the surf swept over the beaches of his home. The remorseless eye of youth fixed itself upon his swollen joints. Yes, but we were quick to perceive how cutting, how apt, how severe he was, how naturally, when we lay under the elm trees pretending to watch cricket, we waited his approval, seldom given. His ascendancy was resented, as Percival's was adored. Prim, suspicious, lifting his feet like a crane, there was yet a legend that he had smashed a door with his naked fist. But his peak was too bare, too stony for that kind of mist to cling to it. He was without those simple attach-

ments by which one is connected with another. He remained aloof; enigmatic; a scholar capable of that inspired accuracy which has something formidable about it . . . . (159)

Here, it is obvious that Louis is a clear and analytical thinker, a cold and unfriendly scholar who aspires to perfection. Woolf uses for Eliot such adjectives as "sardonic," "guarded," "precise," "slightly malevolent" (*D. ii.* 187), "magisterial" (*D. ii.* 292), "sinister and pedagogic," and "very vain" (*D. ii.* 302). She calls him "perfection" (*D. ii.* 278), "a true poet," and "a man of genius" (*D. iii.* 223). On 16th February, 1921 and 16th August, 1922, Woolf wrote that Eliot was "like a chapped office boy on a high stool" (*D. ii.* 90), and "anaemic" (*D. ii.* 189), which reminds us of Louis, who suffered from chapped skin.

It becomes clear that Woolf made up Louis through her interpretation and partly through her imagination. For example, she wrote on Eliot when the Woolfs received a visit from Eliot and Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson: "We discussed criticism, & I find he thinks himself a poet. A little human laughter comes very welcome to him, as I guess, & I think he would willingly break up his formal ways . . . . My guess is that he wishes to detach himself from sets, & welcomes us as an escape" (*D. ii.* 77–78). Once when Eliot revealed his plain feelings to Woolf, she wrote, "'The critics say I am learned and cold' he said.' 'The truth is I am neither'" (*D. ii.* 91). On 22nd October 1927 she noted a little sarcastically that "I dine there to meet Harold & Tom: Tom, of course, in white waistcoat, much the man of the world" (*D. iii.* 163). Such an image of Eliot lives vividly in the portrait of Louis. Louis says "I beg you also to notice my cane and my waistcoat . . . . I wear a white waistcoat now and consult a little book before I make an engagement" (142). And Louis continues:

> This is the arch and ironical manner in which I hope to distract you from my shivering, my tender, and infinitely young and unprotected soul. For I am always the youngest; the most naively surprised; the one who runs in advance in apprehension and sympathy with discomfort or ridicule — should there be a smut on a nose, or a button undone. I suffer for all humiliations. Yet I am also ruthless, marmoreal . . . I condemn you. Yet my heart yearns towards you. I

would go with you through the fires of death. Yet am happiest alone. (142)

Here, Louis says he suffers from "humiliations," which also can be traced to Woolf's diary. On 20th March in 1921, Woolf and Eliot had to take a taxi to Hammersmith because they missed their train. Woolf said that missing trains was awful and Eliot replied to her: "Yes. But humiliation is the worst thing in life" (*D. ii.* 103).

Like Louis, Eliot preferred people to nature as a subject for his poetry. In *The Waves*, Bernard remarks, "My phrases [how to describe the moon] did not meet with his [Louis's] approval" (159). In her diary, Woolf notes Eliot's remarks on poetry: "He [Eliot] told me he was more interested in people than in anything. He cant [sic] read Wordsworth when Wordsworth deals with nature" (*D. ii.* 68).

In the end, Eliot's life was getting harder and harder in 1929, at the time when Woolf began to work on the idea of *The Waves*. She called Eliot repeatedly "poor Tom" (*D. iii.* 223, 331) and wrote: "His face has grown heavier fatter & whiter. There is a leaden sinister look about him" (*D. iii.* 331). This was, according to Woolf, partly because of Eliot's wife, Vivienne, whom he married in 1915 and left in 1933, and whose mental illnesses, such as migranes, insomnia, neuralgia and hysteria had been a very heavy burden for Eliot. Woolf thought it was Vivienne that was the source of evil; Woolf called her a "bag of ferrets," "what Tom wears round his neck" (*D. iii.* 331). Woolf writes in sympathy for Eliot:

> Poor Tom — a true poet, I think; what they will call in a hundred years a man of genius: & this is his life. I stand for half an hour listening while he says that Vivien cant [sic] walk. Her legs have gone. But whats [sic] the matter? No one knows. And so she lies in bedcant put a shoe on. And they have difficulties, humiliations, with servants. And after endless quibbling about visiting — which he cant [sic] do these 8 weeks, owning to moving house & 15 first cousins come to England, suddenly he appears overcome, moved, tragic, unhappy, broken down, because I offer to come to tea on Thursday. Oh but we don't dare ask our friends, he said. We have been deserted. Nobody has been to see us for weeks. Would you really come — all this way?

> To see us? Yes I said. [Eliot wrote on 2nd May to postpone VW's visit, saying circumstances were too much for them (copy, MHP, Sussex).] But what a vision of misery, imagined, but real too. Vivien with her foot on a stool, in bed all day; Tom hurrying back lest she abuse him: this is our man of genius. — This is what I gathered yesterday morning on the telephone. (*D. iii.* 223)

Louis takes a little Cockney actress as his mistress, since he thinks her accent might make him relaxed. However, he suffers terribly from her "vulgarity" (129), which implies that this mistress was inspired by Vivienne Eliot.

Doris Eder, who first pointed out that Louis "does bear a singular resemblance to the great poet, T. S. Eliot" in "Louis unmasked; T. S. Eliot in *The Waves*," has drawn attention to the genealogical record of Louis and Eliot: "In the first draft of *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf had Louis descended from generations of clergymen, as Eliot in fact was. (His grandfather and an uncle were Unitarian ministers in St. Louis[1] and Portland, respectively)" (22).

It is important to note that not only Eliot but also his works can be echoed in Woolf's portrait of Louis. As quoted by Woolf, Lytton Strachey criticizes Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* as; "serious," "cut and dried" (*D. ii.* 79), and these adjectives also represent Eliot himself. His works, Woolf seemed to think, reveal his nature. For instance, Kate Flint has suggested that Louis's words, "I prefer a view over chimney-pots" (142) are reminiscent of "the subject matter of Eliot's early poetry, particularly 'Preludes.'"[2] Doris Eder and Lyndall Gordon have also discussed that the theme of Eliot's *The Waste Land* as portrayed in the character of Louis, especially in his attempt to sum up a whole cultural heritage in "one line capable of linking all in one" (*W* 168).[3] Louis, who needs Percival, for he "inspires poetry" (25) and thinks that Percival "died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death" (109), reminds us again of *The Waste Land*. *The Waste Land* is based on Jessie L Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, which studies the origin of the Grail story and reveals the connection between the Grail story and the Nature Cults in places such as Egypt and Greece, thousands of years ago. Percival is the name of the last of the Grail kings.

II. Egyptian Myth in *The Waves*

As we have seen, Eliot refers to Jessie L Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, which deal with ancient ritual and cults going back thousands of years. Woolf cleverly makes use of Egyptian myth, especially the Osiris-Isis myth for the portrait of Louis and Rhoda.

According to Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis, Osiris, who married his sister, Isis, civilized the Egyptians who were still barbarous cannibals by giving them laws and teaching them how to worship gods, raise wheat and barley with help of Isis. Afterwards leaving Isis to civilize Egypt, Osiris traveled the rest of the world to spread his teaching. During his absence Isis administrated his kingdom. However, soon after the return of Osiris, his brother Set, with seventy-two others, plotted to make him step into a coffer, enclosed him in it and nailed it shut. They successfully assassinated Osiris, casting the coffer into the Nile. Meanwhile, the coffer contained Osiris floated down the river and out to sea and eventually drifted ashore at Byblus. There was an *erica* tree, which had grown round the coffer, enclosing it completely. The king of the land found the *erica* tree, which had already become a fine, big tree, and was suitable as a pillar for his palace, without noticing that the dead body of Osiris was in it.

When Isis heard the news, she lamented for the death of her husband and traveled to Byblus. At Byblus, she became the nurse of a queen's child, concealing her origin. At night Isis disguised herself as a swallow and flew round and round the pillar which encompassed the dead body of Osiris. Afterwards, Isis revealed her real identity to the queen and the king gave her the pillar. As soon as Isis cut the tree and pulled out the coffer from it, she fell over it crying loudly in grief. While Isis left the coffer and went to see her son Horus, Typhon discovered the dead body of Osiris in the coffer lit by moonlight while hunting. Typhon tore it into fourteen pieces and scattered them abroad.

Isis began to seek pieces of Osiris's body one by one and she buried each piece where she found them, lest Typhon found it. However, she could not find his phallus, for fish had eaten it. Therefore, she made an image of it. In this way, she succeeded in reconstituting Osiris's body. In

other words, in Isis's lament for Osiris, tears fallen from her eyes caused an inundation of the Nile and caused Osiris, a vegetation god, to be reborn. This is the outline of the myth of Osiris and Isis, which is obviously connected with sequence of the seasons. (Frazer 362–65, 368–70)

In *The Waves*, Louis and Rhoda long for Egypt from their childhood. Louis says: "I am a boy in grey flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here. Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile" (7). Here he identifies himself as a statue of Egypt, like that of Osiris. After he grew up, he recalled that he had dreamt of the Nile and did not want to wake up (130). Rhoda imagines a desert and oases in Egypt when she takes an arithmetic class: "The figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone. The clock ticks. The two hands are convoys marching through a desert. The black bars on the clock face are green oases. The long hand has marched ahead to find water. The other, painfully stumbles among hot stones in the desert. It will die in the desert" (12).

Louis has acquires characteristics of Osiris as a vegetation god. Frazer explains that: "in ancient Egypt the god whose death and resurrection were annually celebrated with alternate sorrow and joy was Osiris, the most popular of all Egyptian deities" (362). He continues that Osiris was regarded as "a personification of the great yearly vicissitudes of nature, especially of the corn" (362). From his childhood, Louis has been integrated with a tree in his imagination. Louis says like this:

> Flower after flower is specked on the depths of green. The petals are harlequins. Stalks rise from the black hollows beneath. The flower swim like fish made of light upon the dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. (7)

He continues: "I am green as a yew tree in the shade of the hedge. My hair is made of leaves. I am rooted to the middle of the earth. My body is a stalk. I press the stalk. A drop oozes from the hole at the mouth and slowly, thickly, grows larger and larger" (7). Afterwards such expressions

appear a number of times in *The Waves*. For example, "My roots are threaded, like fibres in a flower-pot, round and round about the world" (12), and when he is a student and attends his school chapel, he says that "now all is laid by [Dr. Crane's] authority, his crucifix, and I feel come over me the sense of the earth under me, and my roots going down and down till they wrap themselves round some hardness at the centre" (22). In this way, he himself becomes a plant, stretching his root deeper and deeper, and tries to grasp something hard, "some diamond of indissoluble veracity" (164).

Louis, says: "I have lived a thousand lives already. Every day I unbury — I dig up. I find relics of myself in the sand that women made thousand of years ago, when I heard songs by the Nile and the chained beast stamping" (80), which suggests the ritual of Osiris. Once a year the Egyptians buried effigies of Osiris made of earth and corn, dug them up again after a year or a shorter interval. They found that corn had sprung up from the body of Osiris, which "would be hailed as an omen, or rather as the cause, of the growth of the crops" (Frazer 376). In the resurrection of Osiris the Egyptians saw the symbol of eternal life beyond the death. However, water, the inundation of the Nile was necessary for Osiris to revive. It was Isis that gave water to Osiris. She was a life-giving goddess (Frazer 370).

We can also hear the Egyptian goddess, Isis, in the character of Rhoda. Rhoda, as we have seen, dreams of Egypt from her childhood, becomes a lover of Louis and is characterized by water, in Bernard's word, "the nymph of the fountain always wet" (74). She longs for "the other side of the world" (66), which implies Egyptian myth: "Pool lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns. The swallow dips her wing in dark pools" (66).

Rhoda tries to imagine the world of Egyptian myth; Isis disguised as a figure of a swallow and laments for the lost of Osiris, when she finds his dead body.

Isis was also regarded as protective deity of the sea. As we have seen, the tears dropped from eyes of Isis brought the inundation of the Nile. Therefore, a festival of Isis was held when the Nile begins to rise. At the same time, Sirius, the brightest star of all, starts shining at break of dawn, and it was called as a star of Isis. Subsequently, Sirius, a star of Isis recognised as

"Star of the Sea" and obtained a character, such as guardian deity for sailors (Frazer 370). Rhoda floats white petals in her bowl and imagines her ship sailing on the ocean:

> 'All my ships are white,' said Rhoda. 'I do not want red petals of hollyhocks or geranium. I want white petals that float when I tip the basin up. I have a fleet now swimming from shore to shore. I will drop a twig in as a raft for a drowning sailor. I will drop a stone in and see bubbles rise from the depths of the sea . . . . I have picked all the fallen petals and made them swim. I have put raindrops in some. I will plant a lighthouse here, a head of Sweet Alice. And I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves. Some will founder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone. That is my ship. It sails into icy caverns where the sea-bear barks and stalactites swing green chains . . . ? (11)

Many have seen Rhoda as Woolf's alter ego, for Rhoda describes several private experiences Woolf herself wrote in her own autobiographical writings in *Moments of Being*. For example, like Rhoda Woolf sailed her boat in the Kensington Gardens (*MB* 77). Moreover, Woolf wrote one experience about not being able to step across a puddle: "There was the moment of the puddle in the path; when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something . . . the whole world became unreal" (78). In *The Waves*, Rhoda says:

> I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed. (41)

Woolf also represents her anguish visually when she loses her brother, Thoby:

> I would see . . . and myself between them. I would stage a conflict between them. I would stage a conflict between myself and 'them'. I would reason that if life were thus made to rear and kick, it was a

> thing to be ridden; nobody could say 'they' had fobbed me off with a weak little feeble slip of the precious matter. So I came to think of life as something of extreme reality. And this of course increased my sense of my own importance. Not in relation to human beings; in relation to the force which had respected me sufficiently to make me feel myself ground between grindstones. (137)

After Rhoda knows of the dead of Percival, she hears the sound of "the great grind stone" (101).

The myth of Osiris and Isis operates in the background of *The Waves*, but through Egyptian myth the weakness of Louis and Rhoda is emphasized. Furthermore, the relationship between Osiris and Isis as husband and wife is broken up in *The Waves*.

Louis and Rhoda become lovers[4] for a time but separate, for Rhoda "feared embraces" (132), which suggests that she fears Louis forces her into his own "continuity" (22), his own order. Rhoda complains that Louis always reduces everyone to order (102). However, after Rhoda leaves him, he ultimately gives up his task; to remember and weave together, plait into "one cable the many threads, the thin, the thick, the broken, the enduring of our long history, of our tumultuous and varied day" (130). As Osiris could not be resurrected without the help of Isis, Louis cannot accomplish his task without Rhoda. Then Louis sang a song as follows:

> O western wind, when wilt thou blow,
> That the small rain down can rain?
> Christ, that my love were in my arms,
> And I in my bed again! (131)

Louis repeats the first line twice, first two lines third and the whole of this lyric once, pining for Rhoda, who acquires the property of water, to come back to him, moreover. This also parallels to *The Waste Land*, longing for "the small rain" to revive the barren wasteland.

The love story of Osiris and Isis is subverted by the separation of Louis and Rhoda. Both long for Egypt, but in different ways. In Bernard's words, Louis asks for "a reason," while Rhoda flies to "some far grove and part[ed] the leaves of the laurels and look for statues" (127). Louis attempts to find

out the reason in the figure of Osiris whereas Rhoda seeks statues, something eternal in the figure of Isis, and disguises herself as a swallow. Hence, the love story of Osiris and Isis is not applied to Louis and Rhoda. "For ever," Louis says to Rhoda: "divided. We have sacrificed the embrace among the ferns, and love, love, love by the lake" (149). However, as Gordon regarded their affair as an "aberration" (230), they are innately different; Louis longed for the fertile Nile, while Rhoda longed for the hostile desert, showing the eternal opposition between them.

Such a difference implies the difference between Eliot and Woolf. For Eliot, Egypt is crucial knowledge to acquire a whole cultural heritage. On the other hand, for Woolf, Isis would be a symbol of lament for the dead and of immortality. After the death of Percival, Rhoda accomplishes her goal to make a perfect dwelling-place, and drives a horse to the shore:

> Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose. Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked-back desire to be spent, to be consumed. We will gallop together over desert hills where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets, my offering to Percival. (104)

This image of the horse suggests Pegasus, on whom poets have traditionally called to carry them to immortality; the symbol of the soul in Plato's *Phaedrus*.[5] Rhoda runs riding towards the world of Isis on Pegasus to get eternity. Subsequently she makes a pilgrimage and eventually leave for Spain, where she climbs on the back of a mule, a mountain high enough to see Africa and throws herself into the sea longing for the eternity of Egypt.[6]

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In this essay, I examined especially Woolf's diary and found crucial evidence linking Louis and T. S. Eliot. Woolf's observation and interpretation of Eliot are directly represented in her portrait of Louis. Eliot's writing, especially *The Waste Land*, also can be heard in Louis's attempt to sum up a whole cultural heritage in "one line capable of linking all in one" echoing to the subject matter of *The Waste Land*.

It is clear that Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis echoes in the characters

of Louis and Rhoda in *The Waves*. Louis and Rhoda long for Egypt from their childhood. Louis acquires the characteristics of Osiris as a vegetation god and Rhoda dreams an image of Isis disguised as a figure of a swallow lamenting for the lost of Osiris. However, the relationship between Osiris and Isis as husband and wife is broken up in *The Waves*. Louis and Rhoda become lovers for a time, but separate. Both long for Egypt, but in different ways; Louis longs for the fertile Nile, while Rhoda longs for the hostile desert, showing the eternal opposition between them.

Many have seen Rhoda as Woolf's alter ego, for Rhoda describes several private experiences Woolf herself wrote in her own autobiographical writings. The difference between Louis and Rhoda implies the difference between Eliot and Woolf. For Eliot, Egypt represents a crucial knowledge to acquire a whole cultural heritage, while for Woolf Isis is a symbol of lament for the dead and of giving eternal life, which suggests Woolf's lament for her dead mother, father and brother and her desire for them to live again.

Louis attempts to order himself in a logical way by making use of a mythical method. Conversely, Rhoda tries to make an ideal architecture associated with eternal beauty inspired by Egyptian myth to order her spirit. Woolf cleverly made use of what Eliot called the mythical method and successfully set the deeply distressed, fasting and anguished spirit of Louis and Rhoda against the magnificent, vital deities, Osiris and Isis. In Egyptian myth, Osiris and Isis were originally associated with the fertility of the land and agriculture, and identified with the seasonal cycle of nature. The spirits of Louis and Rhoda, who were cut off from their original relation with nature, lost their way and looked for salvation in Egyptian myth.

Notes

* This is a revised version of a paper read at the 76th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, May 23, 2004.

1 Madeline Moore has pointed out that Eliot's father was "a successful businessman in St. Louis" (n. 23).

2 See n. 58 on *The Waves* 1992.

3 See Eder 19 and Gordon 229.

4 Woolf once said lightly that if she and Eliot had not been so 'sere' they might have loved each other (Gordon 230).

5 See 239, n. 78 on *The Waves* 1992.

6 Gordon insists that Rhoda was not frightened by death, for she thought it was a natural return to the immortal sea (Gordon 217). Furthermore, there is a vital evidence that Woolf longed for eternal life: When Woolf went on to Vézelay in France with Vita Sackville-West, Woolf "spoke, with a deeper seriousness than I [she] had heard her use before, of immortality and personal survival after death" (Sackville-West 136).

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